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The development of a process model of collective turnover

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ABSTRACT

Based on three case studies, we constructed an inductive process model of collective turnover; those instances in organizational life when two or more people choose to leave their organization in close temporal proximity based on shared social processes. The model highlights three phases through which an escalating interaction process that culminates in collective turnover unfolds. First, two or more members of an organizational group experience unresolved dissatisfaction with some aspect of their organization. Second, individual negative experiences are transformed into shared group perceptions through group sensemaking and emotional contagion that occurs in cohesive groups that view themselves as superior to others. Third, when group members feel no hope of improvement but have other opportunities available and few constraints on leaving, they collectively decide to leave their organization, begin searching for placements, and, turn over. We propose theoretical and practical implications of this model.

KEYWORDS

collective turnover ■ emotion ■ group cohesion ■ process model ■ sensemaking ■ turnover

Turnover is an important organizational phenomenon that has invited close attention for decades (e.g. Guthrie, 2001; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, 1977; Mossholder et al., 2005). The general premise of research on turnover is that it is an individual phenomenon. Explicitly or implicitly, turnover research posits that *individuals* independently decide to

leave their organization, regardless of whether antecedents to their decision are individual or organizational (Cohen, 1993; Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Shaw et al., 1998).

The attention to individuals in studies of turnover in organizations is similar to the focus on individuals in many other domains of organization research, such as creativity (Drazin et al., 1999), motivation (Ellemers et al., 2004), job satisfaction (Mason & Griffin, 2002) and social capital (Oh et al., 2006). In recent years, however, there has been recognition that focusing solely on the experiences of individuals ignores other crucial levels of analysis, especially the group level (Drazin et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2004; Mason & Griffin, 2002; Oh et al., 2006). These studies make evident that individuals' attitudes and behaviors often reflect group processes among subsets of organizational members. In particular, some turnover acts that may appear on the surface to be driven by individual decisions actually manifest underlying group processes. In this study, we focus on group processes associated with turnover. We focus on *collective turnover*, which we define as the turnover of two or more organizational members in close temporal proximity based on shared social processes and decisions to leave an organization.

Although not labeled as such, collective turnover has been observed in many organizations and industries (Wysocki, 2000), and its frequent occurrence and considerable consequences warrant close attention. Studies of mergers and acquisitions indicate that target companies' top management often turn over collectively (Walsh, 1988). Press accounts have reported numerous instances of collective turnover involving entire teams of computer programmers, stockbrokers, physicians and attorneys (e.g. Kerber, 2002). Collective turnover has more severe consequences for organizations than does individual turnover (Dess & Shaw, 2001); for example, some law firms have been forced to disband because they lose substantial parts of their practice when multiple partners leave.

Existing scholarly literature has generally been silent on collective turnover, and thus comparatively little is known about this phenomenon. To respond to this important issue, we develop a process model of collective turnover grounded in three case studies of this phenomenon. Our study seeks to describe the elements of this process and the underlying mechanisms through which collective turnover unfolds.

Collective turnover: An understudied phenomenon

Organizational research on turnover typically focuses on the antecedents of individual decisions to quit (e.g. Bluedorn, 1982; Mobley, 1982), including individual experiences and motivational forces, human resource practices

and minority group composition, and organizational events such as the departure of founders and strategy changes (Baron et al., 2001; Burton & Beckman, 2007; Cohen, 1993; Cropanzano et al., 2003; de Croon et al., 2004; Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Maertz & Campion, 2004; O'Reilly et al., 1989; Shaw et al., 1998; Zatzick et al., 2003). Some studies have identified antecedents to turnover that are related to group membership, including group attachment, social integration, network centrality and racial composition (Friedman & Holtom, 2002; Mossholder et al., 2005; O'Reilly et al., 1989; Zatzick et al., 2003), but these antecedents are discussed as inputs to individual decisions to turn over.

Studies have also explored organizational consequences of turnover, including its impact on organization members who remain (Baron et al., 2001; Mobley, 1982; Staw, 1980; Steers & Mowday, 1981). For instance, Krackhardt and Porter (1985) explored how the departure of some employees influenced the attitudes of the employees remaining in an organization based on their relational embeddedness. Even though this research suggests that turnover has implications for other organization members, it still presents turnover as an individual act. On the rare occasions when 'group turnover' from an organization is identified (George & Bettenhausen, 1990), the term refers simply to the proportion of employees in an organization that leave it.

Krackhardt and Porter (1986: 50) criticized the individual-oriented approach, noting that such studies assume that '. . . turnover occurs atomistically within a work group'. In contrast, they examined snowball effects of turnover and found that an individual's turnover decision constituted important cues for others in informal networks who perceived themselves as similar to those who left. Their study represented an important advance on prior work because they abandoned the assumption that turnover events were independent of each other. Nonetheless, they still treated perceived similarity between co-workers as another antecedent factor influencing individual turnover decisions. Our study builds on this literature by recognizing that turnover involves more than group-related antecedents and consequences; it also involves collective processes that lead two or more individuals to make shared decisions to leave their organizations.

Method

In conducting this research, we followed an inductive research logic. An inductive approach is particularly appropriate, since there is no existing theory on collective turnover or the processes and mechanisms through which it unfolds (Anderson et al., 2006; Castilla, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989;

Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Locke, 2001; Yin, 2003). Indeed, inductive methods have been used in a large number of contexts to develop new theory (e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dyck & Starke, 1999; Gersick, 1988; Isabella, 1990; Sutton, 1987).

The great majority of prior studies of turnover have been concerned with variance models that address relationships between discrete independent variables and dependent variables. In contrast, we induce a process theory of collective turnover. Rather than focusing on links between independent and dependent variables measured at discrete points in time, process models explain how a sequence of events unfolds over time to produce a given outcome (Mohr, 1982; Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). 'How' questions are an important first step in exploring an unexamined phenomenon and require process studies that provide stories that explain 'how a sequence of events leads to some outcome' (Van de Ven, 2007: 148) as well as the underlying generative mechanisms (Anderson et al., 2006; Castilla, 2005) that give rise to this process.

A limited amount of research and theorizing regarding individual turnover incorporates a type of process approach. Lee and Mitchell and their collaborators (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee et al., 1996, 1999) describe and test a decision tree that includes multiple choice points and paths over time that may result in individuals deciding to leave their organizations. In addition, Ashforth (2000) elaborates on Ebaugh's (1988) work to describe a process model of individual role exit which includes voluntary turnover as well as other types of exits (e.g. retirement, layoffs, etc.).

We developed our process model of collective turnover from an in-depth study of three cases that were chosen, based on theoretical sampling, as particularly appropriate for illuminating the processes that are our focus (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003). By collecting data from three cases, we were able to assess the versatility of our process model. *Versatility* represents the degree to which the sequence of events that occur in one setting and the underlying generative mechanisms that lead the events to happen generalize to other settings (Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). We found strong support for all elements of our process model across the three cases.

Yin (2003) recommended that analysis of case studies should include chains of evidence that enable external observers to understand how constructs are derived from the case data. Table 1 links the constructs of our process model back to the data from the case studies.

Data collection

The three cases took place in diverse settings. The first (Case 1) involved the turnover of five doctoral students (whom we refer to as the 'new students')

from a graduate department of a North American university. (The doctoral student cohort initially consisted of six students. The first student's turnover transpired earlier and separately from the other students' decisions. For this case, we refer to the turnover of the remaining five students as collective turnover.) Case 2 regarded the turnover of six sales managers from the sales organization of a computer company. Case 3 was about the turnover of three employees from a small contract sales organization. Table 2 summarizes the data collection for the three cases.

The first case on which we collected data was that of the doctoral students. On the basis of our data gathering for this case, we developed an interview schedule that we used for both the second and third cases. These questions are presented in the Appendix.

We began our data collection for Case 1 by conducting open-ended and informal phone interviews with the first doctoral student to leave and then with a doctoral student who played a central role in the events that later transpired. The interviews centered on their experiences in the program, relationships with faculty members and peers, reasons for leaving the program, and thoughts about the turnover. With knowledge gained in these initial interviews, we designed an open-ended email survey that we sent to the new doctoral students. These survey questions are included in the Appendix. We also conducted follow-up telephone interviews with the students. We triangulated between the data gathered from the email survey and the interviews to identify any discrepancies in our data and followed up with participants to ensure that we were gathering complete data.

The interview schedule we developed for the second and third cases served as a guide for our semi-structured phone interviews; we asked follow-up questions that were context-specific based on interviewees' responses. We interviewed six individuals from these two organizations, four for Case 2 and two for Case 3. (One person in Case 2 declined to be interviewed and we were not able to contact the other individual involved in that case. We were also unable to contact one of the three people involved in Case 3.) For all three cases, after we completed the interviews, we sent a draft of this article to informants to confirm its accuracy and subsequently made minor factual changes that they recommended.

Data analysis

We carefully read the data collected from the phone interviews (and, in Case 1, the email responses) so that we thoroughly understood the events that transpired in each case. We then created a detailed narrative for each case to document actions associated with each turnover experience. We only included information that was stated in some way by at least two

Table 1 Evidence of model across cases^a

Phases	Mechanisms	Case 1 (doctoral student cohort)	Case 2 (computer company)	Case 3 (contracted sales organization)
1. Voice behavior: individual dissatisfaction and complaints	Initial dissatisfaction	Students were dissatisfied with how the first student departure was dealt with	Sales managers were upset with the decision to change the compensation policy	Individuals became dissatisfied with their pay and perceived underutilization of their skills
	Complaints	Students complained to the PhD coordinator and other faculty members	Sales managers attempted to negotiate the compensation decisions	Sales representatives complained to the owner
	Unsatisfactory supervisory response	The faculty treated the first student's departure as due only to his personal concerns	The vice presidents did not respond to the managers' desires to keep the former policy	The owner did not respond to the complaints in a satisfactory manner
2. Voice behavior: Group processes	Elevated dissatisfaction	Students felt that some faculty members were too rigid to change and that there were conflicts among faculty members	The sales managers were very upset with the decision	The sales representatives were frustrated by the owner's response
	Social comparison	New doctoral students saw themselves as more research oriented than the advanced students	Sales managers felt that the sales organization had more stringent hiring standards than other departments	The sales representatives were better educated and saw themselves as more ambitious than other employees
	Shared sensemaking	The students regularly discussed their concerns and negative feelings with each other	The sales managers talked regularly about the negative implications of the compensation change	Subgroup discussed their frustrations and concerns about the company with each other

Table 1 continued

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Mechanisms</i>	<i>Case 1 (doctoral student cohort)</i>	<i>Case 2 (computer company)</i>	<i>Case 3 (contracted sales organization)</i>
	Shared negative perceptions	The students felt that the faculty did not care about them as a group	The sales managers were aware that the stock plan's change would negatively affect all of them	The three employees came to see themselves as underpaid and underutilized and the company as financially troubled
	Emotional contagion	The students shared increasing frustration and came to feel no hope for the program	The sales managers expressed their anger about the decision with one another	The three employees 'would sit and vent' when the manager was away; they all felt frustrated
Relational context	Group cohesion	Students reported close relationships among themselves; students who left kept in close touch	The sales managers had worked together for several years and talked and socialized regularly	The sales representatives were friends and they and the administrative employee got along well
3. Exit behavior	Job searching	The students sought other placements. They talked with each other about their actions	The sales managers discussed possible joint ventures, developed plans for new businesses and initiated contact with a recruiter	The sales representatives actively sought other positions and discussed these actions with each other
	Turnover	All of the students left the program	The six sales managers all left	The sales representatives and the administrative employee left
Boundary conditions	The availability of other opportunities	Students could apply (successfully) to other doctoral programs	Sales managers could start their own companies or obtain other employment	Employees were able to find other jobs

Table 2 Summary of the three cases

	<i>Case 1</i>	<i>Case 2</i>	<i>Case 3</i>
Informants	5 doctoral students (of 5 who left)	4 sales managers (of 6 who left)	2 sales representatives (of 3 employees who left)
Data collection methods	Email survey and phone interview	Phone interview	Phone interview
Demographic information for turnover individuals			
Gender composition	2 males and 3 females	7 males	2 males and 1 female
Age range	Mid-20s to early 30s	Early 30s to early 40s	Late 20s to early 30s
Ethnicity	3 white and 2 Asian	7 white	3 white

informants. On the basis of such raw materials, we started grouping the raw data into first-order categories or themes. For example, when informants mentioned that they regularly ‘hung out’ with their peers, we grouped this type of information into the category of relationship. We then aggregated these first-order categories into more abstract, second-order codes, such as group cohesion, that form the basis of the process model presented in this article.

We then determined relationships among these coherent categories by closely following the case stories. We also drew on existing literature to inform our data analysis. For example, we created a category of group sensemaking (cf. Weick, 1995) for those situations in which informants said they talked with each other to understand the situation surrounding them. The three of us analyzed the cases independently, and then identified converging themes across the cases. When different interpretations appeared, we discussed them together and resolved the differences by referring back to the original data.

Case narratives

Case 1: Doctoral program

Prelude to the departure of the first student

Six doctoral students entered the program as a cohort and joined a group of advanced students who had already completed at least their first year of

study. In contrast to the advanced students, most of whom were part time, the new students were enrolled full time. In addition, the new students viewed themselves as much more research-oriented than the advanced students, most of whom they saw as pursuing a teaching career. The new students shared an office that was physically separated from others and took all of their classes together. Moreover, five of them were living in student housing, and they regularly met each other at a local coffee shop to socialize. They bonded as a cohort very quickly. As one of them commented, the new students ‘formed a quite cohesive and friendly culture. They trusted and [hung out] with each other.’

Some of the new students felt dissatisfied almost immediately upon entrance with some aspects of the program. Their major surprise was that the program, which had recently been restructured, did not meet their expectations. The student who would leave first stated, ‘Definitely, the program design did not match what I would like to get in terms of classes. I thought the program had discarded the curriculum and replaced it with something new after I was granted admission.’ Moreover, financial support from the department was less than expected; one student said that: ‘My out of pocket expenses for tuition and fees were much more per semester than what I was made to believe’. Two of the students complained to the program coordinator and the PhD student director, whose responses did not satisfy them. They discussed their dissatisfaction with their peers, who came to share a sense of frustration with the program and some faculty members.

The first departure and reactions among the remaining students

During the first semester, one of the new students decided to leave the program due to his negative experiences. He recalled, ‘The way I felt about the program and a few faculty were sufficient grounds for me to leave’. Apparently attributing the student’s decision to personal financial concerns instead of problems with the program, the faculty did not discuss the turnover with the remaining students.

This student’s departure and the faculty’s silence triggered processes among the remaining five students that eventually led to their collective turnover from the program. The students engaged in intensive discussion about the turnover and the discussions made them even more dissatisfied with the program and some faculty members. One student said that the student’s departure ‘created some psychological instability among those who still were in the program. The faculty’s explanation should [help us] comprehend things going on in the program’, but such explanation had not been forthcoming. Moreover, the student who left the program remained in close

contact with his cohort and continued to participate in the group's discussions about the program, fueling their negative feelings.

Some of the remaining students complained unsuccessfully to faculty members about the faculty's lack of response to the turnover and to the students' ongoing dissatisfaction with the program. But as one student said, 'Obviously, [the faculty] didn't care whether students left or not. [They implied that] if you want to leave, go ahead.' The students received inconsistent and unsatisfying responses and shared their negative experiences with the other cohort members. Over time, more of the cohort perceived fragmentation and personal conflicts among some faculty members. For example, one of the students 'was disappointed that a couple of faculty members could not talk directly with each other, and had to use me to learn what the other party said'. Relationships among faculty members had considerable impact on students; as one commented:

In an environment where faculty members are not on good terms, there can't be much interaction among everybody. It would also be a problem because students can end up finding themselves caught up in between fights among faculty (e.g. during dissertations).

The new students increasingly distanced themselves from faculty members that they perceived as unsupportive, but selectively developed connections with some sympathetic faculty members, two of whom announced their own resignations during the second semester. The remaining faculty members did not offer an explanation for this turnover to the five students. Given all that had happened, all five students came to share a sense that their concerns would not be resolved because there was 'no care by some of the faculty members'. They became convinced that they could only resolve their concerns by leaving the program.

During the second semester one of the students applied successfully for transfer to another university and a second left the doctoral program at the end of the school year. The three remaining students discussed this turnover and felt an increased urgency to search for new opportunities. They continued to speak with their former cohort members about their decision to leave and the availability of other opportunities. At the same time, a respected professor whose research interested the remaining students died suddenly. Following these incidents, none of the students felt any hope; as one said, they didn't 'see any light at the end of the tunnel'. All of them expressed very strong negative emotions toward the program. One said, 'If I couldn't have transferred to another school, I would definitely stop pursuing my PhD degree because I couldn't stand the atmosphere in that program'. Another added that:

the environment was terrible for me. It just wouldn't be possible to study [in my research area] there and the prospects that they would hire new faculty were not the best and in any case it would take time. This was time that I would lose. I do not even mention the learning process that was severely hindered.

Before the start of the second year, one of the remaining students managed to transfer to another school. The remaining two students successfully applied to other programs during the first semester of their second year. They left at the end of the year.

Case 2: Computer company

The second instance of collective turnover that we studied occurred within the sales organization of a large US-based computer company. This sales organization was valued very highly by its team of seven managers whose territories comprised the North American market. As one said:

It was a very difficult place to get a job there, we were very thorough and careful in our interview process . . . There was a high esprit de corps, just like there is in the Marine Corps, because if you made it . . . you were proud because it was not an organization that was easy to stick with.

Another member of this team lamented that other departments had less stringent hiring standards. In hiring people, they were 'bringing in the losers . . . It wasn't true in the sales organization, because we were smarter than that'. The sales management team had worked together for several years. Though they worked in geographically dispersed locations, they maintained close relationships with one another. They talked very frequently about sales strategies, hiring decisions and issues related to common customer accounts. In addition, they attended quarterly sales meetings at corporate headquarters to review sales goals and results with company executives. The regional managers routinely planned informal social gatherings around these meetings or trade shows that they all attended.

Amidst a period of rapid growth in the organization's revenue and stock price, company leaders made an intentional decision to restructure the compensation policy for the sales force. The vice president responsible for Human Resources initiated this change, which was supported by the company president and the vice president of the sales organization. This change had adverse effects on the salaries and cash bonuses for sales personnel, but its primary result was a marked reduction in the number and value of subsequent stock option grants.

At one of the quarterly sales meetings, the two vice presidents announced the change to the team of seven regional sales managers. Upon reviewing the change, which affected the entire sales organization, the managers recognized its substantial effect on their future stock grants. Six of the seven attending managers attempted to renegotiate this decision with the executives. (The sales manager who did not join in the negotiation or further discussion was not as close to the other sales managers as they were to each other. 'He was the odd man out. He had a different perspective on life than did the rest of us and was much harder to deal with.')

The managers argued that the sales organization would lose a substantial share of its management staff if this policy change were implemented. But the vice president of Human Resources responded: 'We haven't lost one yet'.

The sales managers then demanded a meeting with the president. 'He came in to the meeting and we told him this was a catastrophe . . . he basically said that he was going with the plan'. After a lengthy debate that did not resolve their complaint, 'we all looked at each other, and said, "let's go have a drink"'. The six managers went to a local restaurant, where they talked with each other about how upset they were with the decision. One of them said, 'We were angry as hell is what it was. We had been loyal to the company and all of a sudden the company was giving us the flying fickle finger in the face'. Another added, 'I was really, really upset, and everybody was wide-eyed and demoralized'. Yet another stated that the 'VP of Human Resources was like Mephistopheles, he destroyed the company. And ask anyone, the feelings I have are the same if not identical to my friends at the same level.' The managers came to an agreement that, unless the new stock options policy was changed, they would all leave the company when their existing stock options fully matured and could thus be sold for a substantial cash payout. They even agreed to a friendly wager: the last one to quit the company would be responsible for buying everyone dinner.

Over the next several months they continued to discuss the implications of the compensation change. The managers repeated their appeals to the executives on several occasions after the initial meeting, but no change occurred. Even though they felt compelled to stay with the company until they were able to cash out their existing stock option grants, the sales managers initiated plans that would ultimately lead to their resignations. Two of the managers started discussing a possible joint venture and contacted potential venture capital firms about a partnership. Others started developing business plans for sales companies they planned to create, and another manager started working with an executive recruiter to search for potential employment with another organization.

Within a year, all six managers terminated their employment. They did not leave simultaneously, but turnover accelerated after the first manager resigned. The first sales manager to leave said that:

I was getting all kinds of questions and calls from other people in the organization. A lot of people picked up their heads and said 'hey, you're going to start a company, wow.' Once they started seeing people leave . . . they were saying 'yeah, I'm getting out of here'.

One of the last sales managers to leave the computer firm struggled with his decision to leave.

We lost a whole bunch of people. But I personally felt that I could stay here and make a difference . . . But it was frustrating. Morale was bad, we missed the quarter. A lot of my good friends were gone; it wasn't as much fun as it had been. It was a little more lonely for me after all those guys were gone.

He finally left and fulfilled his obligation to buy dinner for his former co-workers when they next gathered at an industry trade show.

Case 3: Contracted sales organization

This case involves three employees in a small US-based contracted sales organization. Two of the individuals were sales representatives and the third worked as an administrative assistant. The organization consisted of eight employees: its owner, four sales representatives (two of whom worked from field locations away from the main office) and three administrative employees. The owner was the only manager in the organization; he directly supervised all employees and was responsible for all management policies and decisions. After the departure some years back of a disliked administrative assistant there was a general sense that organization members got along well with each other. Employees in the main office and field locations generally shared positive relationships and communicated on an ongoing basis.

These three individuals became dissatisfied with their pay and job content. The two sales representatives who worked from the main office were the only employees in the organization to hold bachelor's degrees, and they did not feel that they were being properly compensated for their experience or performance. In addition, they became increasingly frustrated with a perceived underutilization of their skills; their job tasks became monotonous,

and they wanted responsibilities commensurate with their capabilities. As one said,

[the other sales representative] and I would just continually come in each day and look at each other and say, 'what are we doing here?' We felt that we were both much more talented individually and our skills could be used much better.

The sales representatives raised these complaints in emails and individual meetings with the owner. However, despite his expressed willingness to address their concerns, the owner never responded to the complaints in a satisfactory manner. One of them commented, 'I talked to [the owner] a lot [about a raise] . . . He couldn't get his mind around that you have to spend more money to make more money . . . I kept complaining . . .'

The two sales representatives 'became really good friends' who would sometimes 'go out after work'. Together with the administrative staff member, with whom they worked in close proximity, they increasingly found themselves forming a subgroup, which they described in more favorable terms than they did other employees. As one of them said, 'I think we saw each other as being a lot more ambitious . . . We saw ourselves being worth a lot of money, we saw ourselves as being a good deal for our manager.'

The subgroup members discussed their frustrations on an increasingly frequent basis. As one of them said, 'It was one vicious circle. The minute [the owner] would leave the office we'd stop working and sit and vent about this. It got more intense over time.' Over time, they began to have serious concerns about the financial viability of the organization: 'We all agreed that this company is going down, [the owner is] in big trouble, the level of frustration, we were all in the same boat'. They came to a conclusion that their complaints would only be resolved by leaving the organization. As one of them said, 'Once [the other sales representative] saw me seriously looking at other job opportunities . . . I think he said "you know what, I think this is going to suck even more without you. I might as well do the same thing"'.

The subgroup members 'verbally talked about [leaving], not to leave together but certainly [that all three] would leave'. They began looking for other jobs and kept one another informed of their progress. One of the sales representatives posted his resumé on a job search website and the other started actively looking for jobs by talking with contacts. They were careful to keep information about their job searches private; the owner and other employees were not informed about their plans to leave until they officially resigned.

The first resignation accelerated others' plans to leave. The second sales representative acknowledged that his colleague's job search and eventual

resignation motivated him to speed up his own search process. He resigned within two weeks after his colleague, and the administrative employee resigned within the month.

A process model of collective turnover

Figure 1 presents the process model of collective turnover that we developed from these cases. To summarize this model, an initial sense of dissatisfaction on the part of two or more members of an organizational group that is not ameliorated despite complaints to supervisors (an exercise of voice; Hirschman, 1970) instigates an escalating interaction process that produces increasingly negative shared perceptions and feelings about organizational life. Two group processes, shared sensemaking and emotional contagion, serve as generative mechanisms that transform negative individual experiences into negative group experiences. The relational context in which these processes produce shared experiences is characterized by social comparison and group cohesion, both of which are reinforced by the ongoing group processes. As their complaints go unaddressed, group members form increasingly negative shared perceptions and feelings that they eventually realize will only be resolved by leaving the organization. At this point in time, the escalating interaction process shifts from voice to exit strategies (Hirschman,

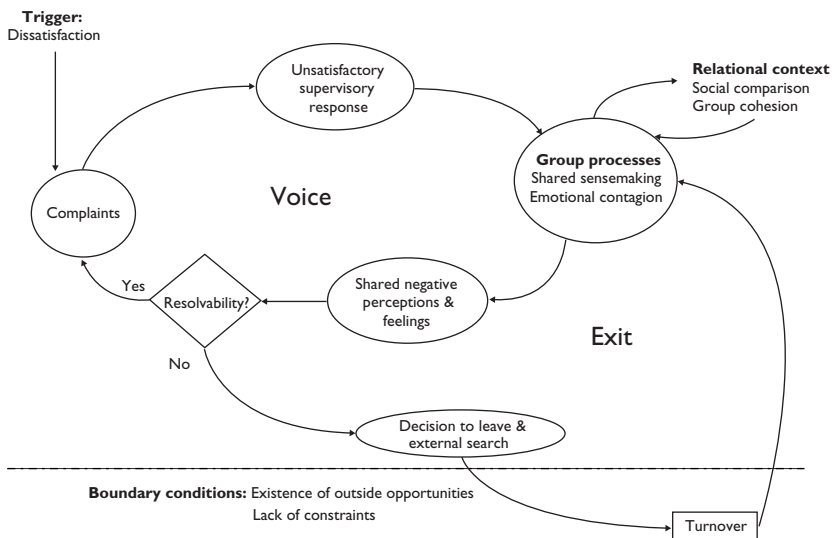


Figure 1 Process model of collective turnover

1970). This new cycle is characterized by decisions to leave, job searches and subsequent turnover by group members. The availability of external alternatives and a lack of constraints on leaving represent boundary conditions for this process; individuals do not turn over if they are constrained from doing so for some reason or unless they secure a new placement or have some other acceptable opportunity. We discuss the elements of this process, including its three phases and the ways they are manifested in our case studies, below.

Voice behavior: Initial dissatisfaction and complaints

Lee and Mitchell (1994: 60) suggested that the process that culminates in individual turnover usually begins with some type of shock, something that 'jars employees toward deliberate judgments about their jobs'. Similarly, Ashforth (2000: 112) suggested that the process that leads to role exit 'is often prodded by events . . . that interrupt the flow of life and prompt one to take stock'. While Lee and Mitchell (1994) and Ashforth (2000) describe a variety of possible shocks or disruptive events, our data suggest that the type of shock that culminates in collective turnover likely involves some type of dissatisfaction with the organization on the part of two or more individuals who belong to an organizational group. This dissatisfaction prompts individuals to complain to their supervisors about their concerns. If they do not receive a satisfactory response, an escalating interaction process (cf. Rapoport, 1970) is initiated that may ultimately, in the presence of certain contextual features, result in collective turnover. An escalating interaction process implies the involvement of two or more parties around certain issues in a spiraling manner, one that includes a pattern of consecutive increases or decreases (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). It escalates when a series of issues cannot be resolved in a way that satisfies both sides, actors in the interaction lack adequate understanding of the situation, and/or are reluctant to adjust their behaviors and attitudes (Masuch, 1985). Ashforth (2000) similarly notes that when individuals experience 'doubts', they are likely to search for confirmation or disconfirmation of them. The lack of disconfirmation of doubts or dissatisfaction on the part of supervisors leads to escalation of the concerns. Cumulatively, these interactions create vicious cycles where almost all activities are linked by amplifying (positive) feedback loops and tension between interacting parties amplifies gradually but continually.

Evidence of dissatisfaction, subsequent complaints and unsatisfactory supervisory responses is present in all three cases. In Case 1, students became dissatisfied with the faculty's silence about the first student's departure and

apparent lack of concern for the remaining students. The students subsequently complained to a broader group of faculty about a wide range of issues and became more dissatisfied with the program and the faculty when they received inadequate responses. In Case 2, the revised guidelines for stock option grants, which would have a marked negative effect on the compensation of all sales managers, represented a considerable shock. The sales managers, who were very upset, raised their concerns in the group meeting immediately upon learning about the unfavorable change. Their dissatisfaction with their supervisor's response prompted them to immediately request a meeting with the company president. In Case 3, ongoing dissatisfaction with low compensation and underutilization on the part of both of our interviewees was never resolved despite their complaints to the president on multiple occasions.

Group processes

As Lee et al. (1996, 1999) show, a shock experienced by an individual need not lead to some form of group process; it may lead only to individual decision-making. However, as our cases make evident, dissatisfaction experienced by individuals who are part of a group may, under some circumstances, lead to group processes. The shift to a group process took place almost immediately in Case 2 and more gradually in Cases 1 and 3. Consistent with our findings, Ashforth (2000: 120) notes that, 'individuals experiencing doubt may be particularly receptive to the opinions of their valued social references'.

Thus, in cases where complaints of individual group members do not receive adequate supervisory or organizational response, shared group processes may occur, especially when two members of the same group share the initial dissatisfaction. Our cases suggest that individually held dissatisfaction transforms into shared negative perceptions and feelings primarily through two group processes: *group sensemaking* about organizational events, and *emotional contagion* among group members. Both of these are facilitated by *social comparison* and *group cohesion*. We will discuss these processes and how they occurred in each case.

Group sensemaking

As Maitlis (2005) notes, group, or shared sensemaking is a social process in which individuals jointly interpret their environment and create collective accounts or narratives from which they derive the meaning of organizational events (Currie & Brown, 2003). It often is triggered by perceptions that an issue is important and that organizational leaders (e.g. supervisors) are

not able to deal adequately with the issue (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Shared sensemaking leads group members to make joint inferences from the experiences of individual members to create group-level knowledge (Langfield-Smith, 1992), that facilitates the construction and reinforcement of intersubjectively shared meanings, perceptions, and interpretations (Walsh & Ungson, 1991) and sometimes exaggerates the impacts of individual group member experiences. The exaggerating effect of shared sensemaking is partially derived from so-called 'objectification' (Zucker, 1977) through which certain perceptions become socially constructed reality and take on truth-like validity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Shared sensemaking took place in all three cases. In Case 1, the doctoral students continually discussed their experiences with each other in a way that led to shared interpretations. Thus, for example, when the faculty did not respond to the first turnover, remaining students became convinced that most faculty members did not care about them either. In Case 2, shared sensemaking began for the six sales managers upon hearing the news of the compensation changes and continued after they unsuccessfully confronted the president when they reconvened offsite to plan their response. In Case 3, the sales representatives noted that whenever the company owner was out of the office 'we'd tell each other about the problems'. As they talked with each other, the group members came to a shared belief that 'this company is going down'.

Emotional contagion

Shared sensemaking is not free of feeling. Rather, there is often considerable emotion shared among group members. The term that best describes this is emotional contagion, a process in which members of a group influence the emotions and behavior of other group members 'through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes' (Schoenewolf, 1990: 50). As Barsade (2002) notes, group members are exposed to other group members' emotions through non-verbal signals such as facial expressions. Emotions are then transferred among group members through a kind of automatic, non-conscious mimicry; people spontaneously mimic each others' emotional expressions, and this mimicry leads them to experience the emotion itself. They then use the emotion as information about what they are feeling. Moreover, research indicates that negative emotions are more contagious than positive ones (Joiner, 1994; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004). While emotional contagion is important in groups, it is more constrained than shared sensemaking due to its reliance on non-verbal cues and physical proximity of members (Barsade, 2002).

All three cases offered considerable evidence of emotional contagion and adequate physical proximity for it to develop. In Case 1, the students had a common office and schedule of courses. They developed highly negative emotions about the program. For instance, one student ‘couldn’t stand the atmosphere in that program’. As they discussed the events that transpired in their program, the feelings came to be shared across the cohort members; by the summer after their first year, for example, none of them could ‘see any light at the end of the tunnel’. In Case 2, the sales members were geographically dispersed. However, they met and socialized regularly, and it was at a time when they were meeting together that the change in compensation policy was announced to them. The managers experienced the change emotionally as well as cognitively, as reflected in their comments about being ‘angry as hell’, ‘really, really upset’, and ‘demoralized’. In Case 3, the sales representatives shared their emotional reactions regularly: ‘The minute [the owner] would leave the office we’d stop working and sit and vent about this’. They also referred to their shared ‘level of frustration; we were all in the same boat’.

Relational context: Social comparison and group cohesion

In order for the group processes discussed above to occur, two relational features must be present. The first of these is social comparison and the second is group cohesion. The two features provide a context for the group processes and are reinforced by them.

Social comparison

Social comparison refers generally to comparative judgments of social similarity on some dimension (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990). Group-level social comparison, in which members of one group compare themselves to members of other groups on one or more dimensions, exaggerates the difference between groups, but strengthens in-group similarity and cohesion (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1978). As individuals relate their personal experiences with others who share their concerns in a group that compares itself favorably to other organizational members, they create a group environment where collective sensemaking and emotional cohesion are likely to emerge (Weick, 1995; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Social comparison occurred in all three cases. In Case 1, the new doctoral students initially compared themselves with the advanced students. They all believed that the advanced students were less research-oriented than they were. Over time, based on interacting with the faculty, they also came

to agree that there was a strong, cohesive, and friendly culture within their cohort in contrast to a seemingly fragmented faculty. In Case 2, the sales managers likened themselves to the Marine Corps, and felt proud of their collective talent and achievements, in contrast with other departments who hired 'losers'. In Case 3, our interviewees were very conscious that they were more educated than other organization members and also viewed themselves as more ambitious than the other members. Social comparison in each case generated the sense of difference from, and, to a considerable extent, superiority over, other organizational members, and thus encouraged their collective sensemaking.

Group cohesion

Group cohesion is a term that has been defined in varied ways across different literatures, but the definitions have in common the idea that members of a cohesive group are attracted to the group, share a bond to it, and value belonging to the group (e.g. Beal et al., 2003; Dion, 2000; Webber & Donahue, 2001). Thus, it is not unusual for members of such groups to share opinions about their experiences. Group cohesion reinforces group members' social comparisons with outgroup members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mackie & Smith, 1998), just as it is fostered by such comparison. Members of cohesive groups are also more likely to participate in collective sense-making that produces shared interpretations and emotions (Weick, 1993). Thus, for example, the isolated manager in Case 2 did not participate in the discussions with the other sales managers; the others formed a cohesive group, but he was the 'odd man out'.

The evidence from our cases suggests that not only were there cohesive relationships within the organizational groups initially, but group cohesion increased as members shared their experiences and feelings with each other. In Case 1, the new student cohort became cohesive very quickly. They shared the same office, took classes together, lived close to each other and socialized together, and had some similar interests regarding research. The cohesion of the remaining five students increased as they felt and shared more and more frustration with faculty responses to their concerns. In Case 2, the sales managers recounted numerous stories of activities they had engaged in together when they were at meetings, as well as ways they stayed in touch with each other between meetings. Their inclination to gather for drinks together immediately following the meeting where they were told about the change in compensation was consistent with their standard practice and with strong cohesion, and they became more cohesive as they discussed their planned departure from the company. In Case 3, group cohesion was helped

by the fact that the subgroup members' workspaces were located in close physical proximity to each other, and strengthened through their informal gatherings and ongoing discussion of negative experiences with their manager.

The cohesive social groups in the three cases did not dissolve as some organizational members turned over. Rather, organizational members who left earlier remained in contact and actively discussed the situations in their previous organizations with the remaining members. The endurance of these cohesive groups beyond individual members' leaving the organization allowed the experiences of organizational members who turned over to have continuing influence on remaining organizational members.

Exit behaviors: External search and turnover

The second crucial shift in our model involved a shift in responses to dissatisfaction from voice to exit strategies (Hirschman, 1970). The shared sense-making and emotional contagion processes that translated individually held dissatisfaction into shared negative perceptions and feelings in all three settings were directly instrumental in the members' decisions to leave their organizations. After multiple efforts at resolving their concerns through complaints, group members jointly concluded that their negative perceptions and feelings would not go away as long as they remained organization members. They collectively decided that leaving the organization represented their only feasible choice. Their response strategies then shifted towards exit-oriented behavior as they initiated searches for new opportunities outside their organizations. External searches and subsequent member turnover both prompted further shared sensemaking and emotional contagion. Group members informed one another of their progress and discussed possible alternative opportunities together. These ongoing discussions reinforced their shared negative experiences and increased remaining members' commitment to leave.

Lee and Mitchell (1994) suggest that there may be both 'pushes' and 'pulls' on organizational members that affect their decisions to leave their organizations. While there may often be external forces that pull members to make exit decisions (such as recruitment by other organizations), the impetus in our cases came exclusively from the employees' own decisions based on the group processes in which they participated. In Case 1, the new doctoral students came to feel no hope about the program. These feelings further strengthened and solidified their group cohesion and encouraged the remaining students, building on ongoing communication with members of their cohort who had already left, to apply to other programs; within six

months the five remaining cohort members all took steps to leave and had done so by the end of the next academic year. In Case 2, the sales managers informed one another about their job searches and, in two cases, worked on plans to start collaborative ventures. When the first manager resigned, the other managers talked with him and each other about his decision. They also ramped up their own plans to leave. By the time only one sales manager remained he felt 'lonely', and also left. In Case 3, the subgroup members came to have much less trust in the ultimate capabilities of the organization to survive. They started looking for jobs, and regularly talked with one another about their plans, although they did not tell other organization members that they were doing so. The first turnover prompted more shared sensemaking and accelerated the remaining two individuals' job search and turnover.

Boundary conditions for turnover

While none of our respondents were initially sought out by others (e.g. head-hunters or possible employers), all of them were able to get placements. It is quite likely that, had they all been less employable (or, in the doctoral students' case, less suitable for admission into other programs), they would not have left their organizations. Individuals may be less likely to react to dissatisfaction when they do not perceive that outside opportunities are available to them (Ashforth, 2000; Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 1995; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Thus, an important boundary condition for our model is that individuals perceive the availability of external opportunities.

Further, Lee et al. (2004) and Mitchell et al. (2001) have developed constructs of on the job and off the job embeddedness, referring to the degree to which employees have strong links to their job or community, the extent to which these fit the employees' 'life spaces', and the ease with which these links would be broken by leaving their jobs. The greater the embeddedness, the more the constraints on leaving the organization.

The respondents in the first and third cases were not married at the time and did not have family or other ties requiring that they stay in their present position. The respondents in the second case referred to their stock options as 'golden handcuffs' that impeded them from leaving their company; once the stock options matured, however, they took steps to leave. Thus, the participants in our cases were not so strongly embedded in their organizations or communities that they were unable to leave their organizations (at least eventually). However, such embeddedness in either work or home would certainly serve as a boundary condition.

Discussion

Based on analysis of our three cases, we have induced a process model of collective turnover that explains how groups of organizational members decide to leave their organizations in close temporal proximity based on shared social processes. In our model, two or more individual group members' initial experience of dissatisfaction that is not satisfactorily addressed instigates an escalating interaction process. That process initially centers on voice strategies. One or more group members complain to supervisors about the issues that concern them and receive responses that they deem unsatisfying. Shared sensemaking and emotional processes in cohesive groups that compare their own group quite favorably to other organizational groups transform these negative individual perceptions into shared group experiences. When group members perceive that their problems will not be resolved, the escalating interaction process starts to revolve around exit-oriented behavior. Unless they experience serious constraints or are unaware of external possibilities, group members initiate external searches and subsequently turn over when they secure a new placement.

Implicit in our model are several potential 'stopping points' along the way to collective turnover. For example, we do not expect that collective turnover will occur if two or more members of a group do not experience initial dissatisfaction, if they do not complain to a supervisor, or if supervisors respond to initial complaints in a satisfactory manner. Further, if the dissatisfied persons are not part of a cohesive group that compares itself favorably with other organization members, their individual experiences will be less likely to be converted into a shared experience. For instance, the one sales manager who was not part of the cohesive group did not participate in the group processes and did not leave the organization. Turnover would also be less likely if our boundary conditions are not met, that is, if group members do not perceive outside opportunities for employment or equivalent placement or if they cannot leave their job or community for some other reason. Studying the extent to which collective turnover occurs only if all our predicted conditions are present would provide an appropriate test for our model.

With the knowledge from our case studies, we are able to flesh out more fully what collective turnover is or is not. We defined collective turnover as the turnover of *two or more organization members in close temporal proximity* based on *shared social processes and decisions*. Turnover is only collective when it meets all conditions of this definition. Collective decisions to turn over come about as a result of group processes such as shared sensemaking and emotional cohesion that are fostered by social

comparison and group cohesion and that lead the members to share negative perceptions and feelings about their organization. When they reach the conclusion that their problems cannot be resolved, they decide to leave and begin to take steps to do so in close temporal proximity.

Thus, multiple organizational members' leaving their organization in close temporal proximity to each other does not necessarily demonstrate collective turnover, unless they have also engaged in group processes that lead to collective turnover decisions. For example, while two faculty members left the department in Case 1, we would not consider their turnover to be collective unless they engaged in shared social processes that produced a jointly held basis for leaving the university.

In addition, most *observed* instances of collective turnover are likely to be sequential rather than simultaneous. After deciding to exit, organization members may experience different levels of difficulty in their external searches due to different expectations, capabilities and opportunities. Unless individuals are working together to form a new partnership or are jointly moving to a new organization, actual turnover will occur at different points in time.

The versatility of our model

We believe that our induced process model of collective turnover is generalizable, or versatile, in Van de Ven and Poole's (2005) terminology. Even though our three cases are from distinct contexts, there was considerable convergence at the level of actions and underlying mechanisms in the processes that occurred. In addition, conditions that promote collective turnover, including employee dissatisfaction, inadequate supervisory responses to complaints, and cohesive social groups, are widely present in organizational settings (Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Roscigno & Hodson, 2004; Withey & Cooper, 1989). These conditions create a real possibility for collective turnover when group members perceive external opportunities.

Implications for theory and research

The results of our study are consistent with other work (e.g. Drazin et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2004; Mason & Griffin, 2002; Oh et al., 2006) that indicates how apparently individual actions may reflect group processes. More importantly, we have developed the concept of collective turnover. We have also shown that turnover decisions are sometimes joint rather than individual and arise from group processes that transform dissatisfaction experienced by individuals into group experiences. It is important for further research to explore the contours of the collective turnover process in a variety

of organizational situations, and, in particular, to consider apparently individual turnover from a new perspective that includes the possibility that many turnover decisions are less individual than they appear to be on the surface.

In addition, our study suggests the importance of a more nuanced perspective on the role of relationships in organizations than has often been the case with respect to turnover. For example, Mossholder et al. (2005) found that the more central employees were in organizational networks at one point in time, the less likely they were to turn over later. But they did not explore strengths of ties within these networks or any dimensions of group processes there. Our study also found that strong relational ties, at least as these are indicated by membership in cohesive groups, affect the turnover behavior of groups of organizational members. But we have also demonstrated that sometimes a position in a close-knit network of relationships may foster, rather than reduce, turnover. Specifically, the processes of shared sensemaking and emotional contagion that translate individual dissatisfaction into group-level experiences ultimately exert influence on organizational members who are members of cohesive groups that see themselves as superior to others to turn over. Thus, our results indicate the importance for future research of attending not only to group ties and membership, but also to patterns within groups and between groups and their larger organizations, in order to understand turnover decisions, especially collective ones.

Finally, our study suggests the value of a process approach for understanding antecedents of collective turnover. Almost all turnover research other than that of Lee and his colleagues (Lee et al., 1996, 1999) has used a variance approach that relates individual turnover decisions to other variables. By using a qualitative research method in which we induced a process model, we have provided insights into the processes and underlying mechanisms through which collective turnover comes to pass, insights that would be much harder to glean using a variance approach. Similar to Lee and Mitchell (1994), our findings indicate that turnover is not a discrete variable that is related to one or more antecedents. Rather, collective turnover decisions involve multiple processes that emerge over time, beginning with instances of individual dissatisfaction. Understanding turnover decisions requires an examination of how they unfold and how certain boundary conditions affect these processes.

Implications for managers

Our investigation suggests that dissatisfaction on the part of two or more individuals who are part of an organizational group might trigger collective

turnover if it is not addressed appropriately. We thus caution managers to pay attention to several issues regarding their relationships with employees. First, managers should attempt to understand the reasons behind individual employees' dissatisfaction, and should pay particular attention to dissatisfaction expressed by two or more individuals in a group. Second, managers should be aware that their responses to the concerns of individuals may impact other organizational members' decision-making about turnover. Third, managers should attempt to understand the relational contexts of their employees. Employees are always in some type of social relationship in organizations (Castilla, 2005; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993), and their perceptions and behaviors reciprocally influence other members of their cohesive groups (Shah, 2000). Thus, how managers act may have implications for group as well as individual responses. To the extent that managers are able to address dissatisfaction while individual members are still attempting voice strategies, they may be able to pre-empt collective initiation of exit strategies. The spiraling effects of initial turnover may make it difficult if not impossible to stabilize a work group once individuals start leaving.

Limitations and next steps

We acknowledge the limitations of three retrospective case studies in relatively small organizational units and encourage future studies to pursue ideas left open in our exploratory study. We also wish to suggest several additional issues that deserve close attention.

First, it would be important to explore what forms (if any) collective turnover would take in larger groups of people. It may be that additional group processes would be required under such circumstances.

Second, in our study, most of the individuals involved in collective turnover were male (over 73%), especially in Cases 2 and 3. Our cases do not allow us to systematically investigate the effect of gender on collective turnover. However, some evidence suggests that women are less likely to engage in open conflict with their supervisors than male workers (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). Accordingly, it is reasonable to anticipate that the gender composition in a workplace may influence the likelihood of collective turnover.

Third, all the employees we studied in Cases 2 and 3 were salaried and non-unionized. The scarce literature that explicitly links exit and voice with turnover (Hammer & Avgar, 2005; Sverke & Goslinga, 2003) concentrates almost entirely on non-exempt and unionized employees. It is likely that our respondents' status increased their freedom to leave their organizations when they were dissatisfied.

Fourth, further research should also examine the role of opinion leaders. There was a clear opinion leader in Case 1, but in the second and third cases we could not meaningfully discern the impact of particularly influential group members, although we sensed the existence of such impact. Small group research shows that ‘small groups are regularly differentiated into a few core members who contribute actively to conversation and task performance and receive a great deal of attention, and a large number of peripheral members who rarely participate and receive little attention’ (Gould, 2002: 1143–4). These few high-status group members often become opinion leaders in their group and thereby shape the opinions of other group members. Therefore, whether opinion leaders are in explicit conflict with supervisors may affect the likelihood of collective turnover.

Fifth, we noted that all of the turnovers in our study resulted from ‘push’ factors. Individuals decided to leave their organizations and sought other placements; they were not initially recruited externally. Pull factors such as external recruitment of one or more group members might also be expected to affect the group processes that give rise to collective turnover, and it would be of value to explore their impacts.

In conclusion, in this article we have developed an inductive theoretical model that draws attention towards the group origins and processes that produce collective turnover. We hope that the model developed here will increase awareness of and exploration of this important but inadequately explored phenomenon.

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Appendix: Interview questions for the studies

Interview questions for doctoral student cohort (Case 1)

I. General questions

- (1) Please tell us something about the program during the two years, for example, atmosphere, structure, reputation, faculty members, student quality, and development [not limited to these aspects].
- (2) According to your own understanding, what led to the complete turnover of the doctoral students?

II. Questions about experiences in the program

- (1) After joining the program, was the program consistent or inconsistent with your expectations? If so, in what aspect(s)? Among them, which one(s) were your major concern(s)?
- (2) What did you think about the relationship among faculty members?
- (3) Did the relationships among faculty members affect your attitude and emotion toward the program?"
- (4) In general, did you develop a positive, neutral, or negative attitude towards the program?
- (5) How do you rate the relationships among the cohort of six doctoral students during the time when you were still in the program?

- (6) Did you often talk with your cohort about what you thought about the program, the faculty, and any other things related to your experiences and opinions of the program?
- (7) How do you rate your overall relationships with faculty members?
- (8) Did you often talk with any faculty members about your experiences and opinions of the program?
- (9) How do you rate your relationship with both junior and senior students?
- (10) Overall, did you think that advanced students were helpful in addressing your concerns?
- (11) Please explain in detail why you left the program.
- (12) Do you know why other students left the program?
- (13) Besides the questions above, do you have any other things to add?

**Interview questions for computer company and contracted sales company
(Cases 2 and 3)**

General orienting questions

1. Could you tell me what type of work you did at your prior company?
How long did you work there?

General questions about your former company and its structure while you were there

2. Can you tell me some things about your former company? For example, its structure? Size?
3. Was there a tendency for people to work or talk in subgroups (e.g. people who were hired about the same time, work departments, different locations, etc.), or did everyone pretty much work and talk together?
4. If there were subgroups, along what lines were they formed? Did they change over time while you were there?
5. What was your impression of how much people liked each other? Relatedly, how well did managers at your company get along with each other? Were employees close to one another?

Your experience at your company

6. How did you get along with your manager(s)? Did this change over time, and if so, how?

7. Were you part of one or more subgroups? How did this change over time?

Your turnover experience

8. Could you tell me in your own words why you left your prior company? When did you leave? What type of job did you go to?
9. How many others left at approximately the same time (e.g. within a year of your leaving)?
10. Please tell me the story of your turnover experience. Start with when you started considering leaving the organization and trace for me what happened through when you actually left. Please include in the story others who were involved in it, e.g. people with whom you talked regularly.

Some specific questions about the turnover story in case they don't arise naturally within your story.

- Tell me when you initially felt some dissatisfaction. How and when did this come about? Did this change over time?
- What did you do when you first felt dissatisfied? Who did you talk to? To managers? To one or more of your co-workers? To people who had recently left?
- What did they tell you, and how did that affect you?
- When in relation to your own dissatisfaction did you hear that anyone else was dissatisfied? Did this have an effect on your own feelings?
- Did (all the) people who expressed their dissatisfaction also leave?
- Did those of you who left see yourselves as different in any way from others in the organization?
- Did you and the others who left feel the same sources of dissatisfaction, or did you have different reasons for being dissatisfied?
- To what extent did others in the organization who remained there share similar reasons for dissatisfaction?
- How many others left at about the same time, for example within the same year or so? Could you give an approximate timeline?
- If others left before you, what was your understanding of why they left?

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